DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 093 CG 022 598

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TITLE Life, Love, and Dreams from the Nineties.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Southwestern Psychological Association (36th, Dallas, TX, April 12-14, 1990). For a related document, see CG 022 597.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Dreams; Individual Differences; *Interviews; Life Events; Life Satisfaction; *Love; *Old Old Adults; Oral History; *Personal Narratives; Research Methodology

ABSTRACT

Literature reveals few if any studies made of 90-year-olds, much less those who are alert, analytical, and possible introspective. Through the use of in-depth interviews, this study attempted to add to what little is known about 90-year-olds today, particularly information about the life and thoughts and the love and dreams of a generation which is reaching the end of a century and the end of life. Subjects (N=4) were located in the community. Five interviews were conducted with each subject at weekly intervals; each interview lasted about an hour and was recorded on audiotape. Interviews focused on family and childhood; adolescence, association with the opposite sex, starting a career, and marriage; the productive years from age 30 to 70; the present age; and present age and beliefs about death and the role that love had played in the subjects' lives. The results of the interviews indicated these individuals found meaning in being imaginative, inventive, and disciplined and in leading productive, useful, and self-satisfying lives. They also found meaning in the weight of past mistakes and lessons they shoulder, in romantic love on the one hand and pragmatic love on the other, and also in setting goals, but only with a firm sense of when to modify them. Research is needed with many more individuals. (ABL)

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ED320093

SWPA April 1990

Life, Love, and Dreams from the Nineties

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This is paper two of two papers. See paper one "INTERVIEWING THE NONAGENARIAN" by Cochran, Wolanin, and Wright, also presented at the Southwestern Psychological Association (SWPA) in Dallas, Texas in April of 1990. For reprints and information contact Samuel W. Cochran, Division of Behavioral and Cultural Sciences, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX 78285-0652. Phone: (512) 691-4375

CG022598

SWPA, DALLAS 1990

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Life, Love, and Dreams from the Nineties

Natalie K. Wright, Mary Opal Wolanin, and Samuel W. Cochran

SWPA Conference - April 12, 1990

The life cycle approach to the study of human beings has been the victim of slowly developing conceptualization as the well-studied area of infancy and childhood disappeared into the less well-known adolescence. For many years, adolescence was followed by a long period which extended to death and was known as adulthood. With the growth of the science of Gerontology, the last years of life have variously been termed senescence, later adulthood, aging, and other names which seek to describe the chronological years between 65 and death. Recently, attention has been paid to the fact that two generations are represented in this group--the 85-year-old mother, for example, has a 65-year-old daughter or the 90-year-old has a 70-year-old daughter who has a 50-year-old daughter.

Trying to study those over 65 years of age as a homogenous group is absurd. Each ten-year cohort in this past century has been faced with such an

information-expansion and technological advance that no two have comparable experience. Yet, the universal process of discovering the world and attaching meaning to it, of living through the psychological changes that happen to the individual as individual, remain essentially the same--as in Plato's time. However, we have rarely had the opportunity to probe the experience of the person who has seen almost a century of life and to ask what he sees as the meaning of it all. What has been the most important and what the least consequential when seen from a distance of 50 to 80 years? What, after all, is love? And how is the 90-year-old different from the younger adult?

Literature Review

A close look at the literature reveals few if any studies made of 90-year-olds much less those who are alert, analytical, and possibly introspective. Instead, the focus in the available literature has been on either the young old or the very old, particularly centenarians and the factors which account for their longevity. Through the work of individuals such as Busse and Maddox (1985), Dunbar (1957), Jewett (1973),

Palmore (1969a, 1969b), Palmore and Stone (1973), Pfeiffer (1970), and Segerberg (1982), we have learned something about what the old-old are like and their physical, social, and psychological characteristics that have perhaps allowed them to become so old. We have not learned, however, what it means to be old or what life, living, and aging have meant to the older individual. For this, we turned to studies of meaning in old age.

Unfortunately, there have been very few studies conducted concerning meaning in later life except possibly that of Kaufman (1986) who found that meaning in later life does not come from age but from situations, values, and knowledge of an entire life the elderly person possesses.

Importance of Study

Lacking well-defined information concerning nonagenarians and their lives, then, gerontologists and others have been left to make assumptions regarding who and what a 90-year-old is. We do know that they are the last of the "horse and buggy" generation; they can remember the first radios, the first highways, early

airplanes, the world wars, and the Great Depression. Yet, they also learned their multiplication tables, courted their first love, married, held their first baby, and wept beside their parents' graves just as human beings have done for centuries. Through the use of in-depth interviews, the present study was undertaken in an attempt to add new information to what little we know about 90-year-olds today, information about the life and thoughts and, uniquely, the love and dreams of a generation which is reaching the end of a century and the end of life.

Method and Subjects

Since my colleague has already provided you with information concerning our methodology and our subjects, I will move on to our analysis (See "Interviewing the Nonagenarian" by S.W. Cochran, M.O. Wolanin, and N.K. Wright).

Results

Our results can be divided into three general areas: Life, love, and dreams.

Life. The life stories of our nonagenarians revealed a variety of things, one of which was a difference in the celebration of holidays. They remember Christmas as a time of coming together and great celebration not of giving and receiving toys. In fact, they report having almost no toys in their lifetime. Today, they take pride in their ingenuity in developing games and toys. This is how one man described it:

> We had all sorts of games. Thinking back over the games we played, they were absolutely ridiculous, but they were something we arranged on the spur-of-the-moment...It was really quite idiotic, but we thought it was a lot of fun. It was inventive. We didn't have the things that children have today because the things they have today weren't even dreamed of at that time.

We also discovered a difference in the way our nonagenarians spoke of their mothers and fathers. They remember their fathers as being hard workers and providers but contributing little else. They remember their mothers, however, with not only a great amount of

fondness but also with an extreme amount of respect for she was the disciplinarian, the one who taught them right from wrong. One of our nonagenarians described his mother this way:

> She was a very dear person. I have to admit that I was closer to her than I was to my father, and I guess the reason was in my early days she was the disciplinarian. And even in my teenage days, she was the one that made the decisions...It was all left to her, and she never that I know anything about told me anything wrong.

The lives of our nonagenarians also reveal the presence of emotional burdens, things they perhaps regret having done or that served as a hard lesson, and these are still remembered today with a certain amount of sadness. One of our 90-year-olds, for example, had this to say:

> I've been satisfied with my life and living in every way except in my younger years I didn't live nearly as close to the Lord as I'd like to have. I've been very unhappy about that since that time, but at that time, as I think back about

it, I thought I was having an awful good time!

Finally, we discovered that our nonagenarians exhibit a great deal of pride in their achievements and what they have been able to do for others. They look back on their lives with a certain amount of self-satisfaction and describe their lives as having been happy and without regrets. One man put it this way:

> I forget the bad. I say I forget anything that's in the past, and I look forward to the future...Any regrets? I don't guess I have. Whatever has been, has been. That's it.

Love. Looking at the presence of love and its influence in the lives of our nonagenarians proved to be quite interesting. They report having experienced many different kinds of love, including the love of work, family, friends, pets, and hobbies, all of which they describe as important and rewarding. The way they talk about love between the sexes, however, is what proved most interesting. They speak of a young love, a one love, a romantic love, a love they shared with only one individual in their lifetime. They describe this love with great feeling and emotion and remember it

with fondness. One man remembered it this way as he was describing a train trip he and his wife took from Oklahoma to Virginia in a Pullman sleeping car:

> My wife had used the lower bunk to get undressed to go to bed. She called me, and I went in and climbed up a ladder that they had to the upper bunk and got undressed and was all ready to call it quits for the night when she called me from down below. She called me by name and said, "There's a bug down here." I said, "Well, pinch it and it will go away," or some such idiotic remark. She started to cry, of course. That's a woman's big weapon is her teardrops. I said, "I'll be right down," so I climbed down...I couldn't find any bug. I finally said, "I can't see any bug around here. I'm going back up to the upper bunk." She said, "No, you stay down here. It might come back. You stay here." So I spent the night in the lower bunk with her...and what happened during the night I'm sure I don't know!

It appeared that for many of our nonagenarians this feeling of love changed later in life and became almost practical because this same individual described his relationship with his second wife like this:

> My second marriage was really a mistake...Everybody that I knew urged me to marry her and take care of her, and I did in a financial way...We were never intimate like a bride and groom. We got along fine, though. She was a good cook and liked it...But after she died, I said never again.

Dreams. When asking our 90-year-olds about their dreams, we separated them into ambitions, daydreams, and night dreams. When analyzing their responses to questions about daydreams and dreams at night, we found about half report having them and half do not, and if they do report having them, they usually do not give any weight to them. It was the analysis of their ambitions, however, which proved most striking. We found them to be ambitious individuals, to have dreams of becoming doctors, lawyers, and war heroes. Sometimes these ambitions were realized, and sometimes

they were not. Other times, however, they were modified or changed completely when the individual realized the once possible had become the impossible. These were not individuals who spent their lives wanting things they knew they could not have. One man, for example, when asked if he had any ambitions said:

> Well, I didn't get to be president of the United States. That's what it started out to be. I didn't go into politics because I've always been a prohibitionist. Funny thing, I won't ever touch liquor or anything like that. I'm a church man rather than a party man, and so I knew I couldn't get elected dog catcher down here!

Discussion

We have tried to provide for you today not only a methodology for interviewing nonagenarians but also a picture of what we found a group of 90-year-olds to be like through the use of that methodology. We have tried to give you some idea as to what they consider to be meaningful about their lives, loves, and dreams. We found these individuals to find meaning in being imaginative, inventive, and disciplined and in leading

productive, useful, and self-satisfying lives. They have also found meaning in the weight of past mistakes and lessons they shoulder, in romantic love on the one hand and pragmatic love on the other, and also in setting goals, but only with a firm sense of when to modify them.

Strong conclusions about these individuals, however, are not warranted at this point. Research is needed with many more individuals before this will be possible. It is hoped, though, that through more research with individuals such as these we will gain more insight into what they have to tell us about living through the psychological changes common to us all and the universal process of discovering the world and attaching meaning to it.

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